

Vera Tamari - artist

submitted by Toine Van Teeffelen

11.06.2006

"We Lack the Family Atmosphere These Days"

By Rana Anani

Vera Tamari comes from an artistic family. Her brother Vladimir is a painter, and her sister, Tania Nasser, a singer. They were brought up in a climate of interest in music, literature and visual art. Vera studied fine arts at Beirut Girls College before going on to study ceramics in Florence, supplemented by courses in Britain and Japan. She took a masters degree in History of Art and Islamic architecture at Oxford, and now teaches at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

I met Vera Tamari in her modest studio in Ramallah and asked whether she develops her work on the basis of a specific idea or whether she molds the clay spontaneously.

"I always have a subject in my mind that's been crystallizing there for a long time. It comes from certain impressions I have in my daily life. I let them float in my mind until the idea settles. Occasionally I draw preparatory sketches so that I have a clearer idea of where I am going. I usually choose a subject that needs to be treated from various angles, something that I can tackle through a series of works.

"Recently, two subjects have particularly interested me. The first are the paintings inspired by the natural landscape in Palestine, hills, trees and grass. I usually concentrate on texture and liveliness, and try to reflect these in my works. The second subject I am interested in right now is family portraits. I have been looking for old photographs of my family from the twenties and thirties, when they lived in Jaffa. I try to create works that reflect the spirit of that period, through my own eyes.

"I don't look at these old photographs in a conventional way. I try to see something in the spirit and atmosphere of the picture that will reflect the true warmth that existed between the members of the family. Families used to sit all poker-faced in front of that modern contraption, the camera. I can't help thinking how there are intimate ties between the people despite the one-dimensional expressions presented to the camera. I don't draw the sitters' faces - it isn't relevant to know whether this is my father, brother, uncle, or even me.

"The idea came to mind as a result of the feeling that we lack the family atmosphere these days. The large extended families we had have been scattered throughout the world. My mother has often talked to me about how close our family was in the past. We don't seem to have that closeness nowadays. Sometimes they would all meet together in family gatherings, and I have tried to record those moments. In a sense I felt I was putting myself in touch with that past family existence. So far, I have done eight or nine works on this subject.

"Usually I make the people in the colors of the natural clay, but I color the background. This seems to give a suitable atmosphere. I use wood and other natural materials, like twigs and grass. I add these to the work once it has been almost completed. In other works representing scenes from nature I use old broken pieces of clay that I have collected.

"In preparing the clay, I insert a large piece of clay into the wooden frame and work on it until it fills the whole area. This is a tiring process that requires a lot of hard work and kneading. The clay must be even and moist. It is like bread dough, but heavier and harder. Then I start making the figures and begin adding decoration and detail. Throughout this stage, I maintain the dampness of the clay and cover it so that it will not be exposed to sun or draughts. Usually it takes a week to dry. It is a slow and difficult process. After the piece is completely dry I remove it from the frame and fire it. I always try to fire several pieces in the oven at the same time, to make full use of the heat. The pieces need to be fired for several hours, and need a day to cool. Only then can I begin to paint them.

"The subjects I tackle in my clay plaques, particularly people, have an intimate nature, so it would not work to make them large; they would lose their meaning.

"In a sense the pottery industry here is in its infancy, if we are not speaking of the traditional village pottery which has its own heritage, made by women who instinctively know how to make balanced and harmonious jars. They also know how to decorate and apply natural colors. This tradition was very beautiful, but unfortunately it is dying out. A pottery department has been opened at Al-Tireh College in Ramallah, so that young women will now be trained in this."

TJT 15 November 1996

Source:
A TIME OF FRAGMENTATION: PALESTINIAN ARTISTS 1993-2000
Ed. by Toine van Teeffelen
The Jerusalem Times
1999

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